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‘Words Flying Through the Air’: Tribal Radio as a Health Information Resource for Rural American Indian Reservation Residents



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Abstract

My community-based, participatory research project explores and supports the role of tribal radio in providing access to accurate, culturally relevant health information for residents of rural American Indian reservations in the U.S. American Indians and Alaska Natives are disproportionately affected by digital divides and health inequities, and the local, tribally owned and operated radio stations are a key health information resource in many tribal communities. My project encompasses a national survey of all 67 tribal radio stations currently registered in the U.S., as well as two case studies conducted in close partnership with the tribally owned radio stations KUYI Hopi Radio (Hopi Reservation, Arizona) and KYUK (Bethel, Alaska) where I will be conducting fieldwork this summer. Through interviews with station leaders, content analyses of health-related content, and focus groups with listeners, I aim to understand how tribal radio contributes to improved health awareness and outcomes in this population. Through a set of direct community outcomes, the project directly contributes to the missions of the partnering radio stations.

Community Partners

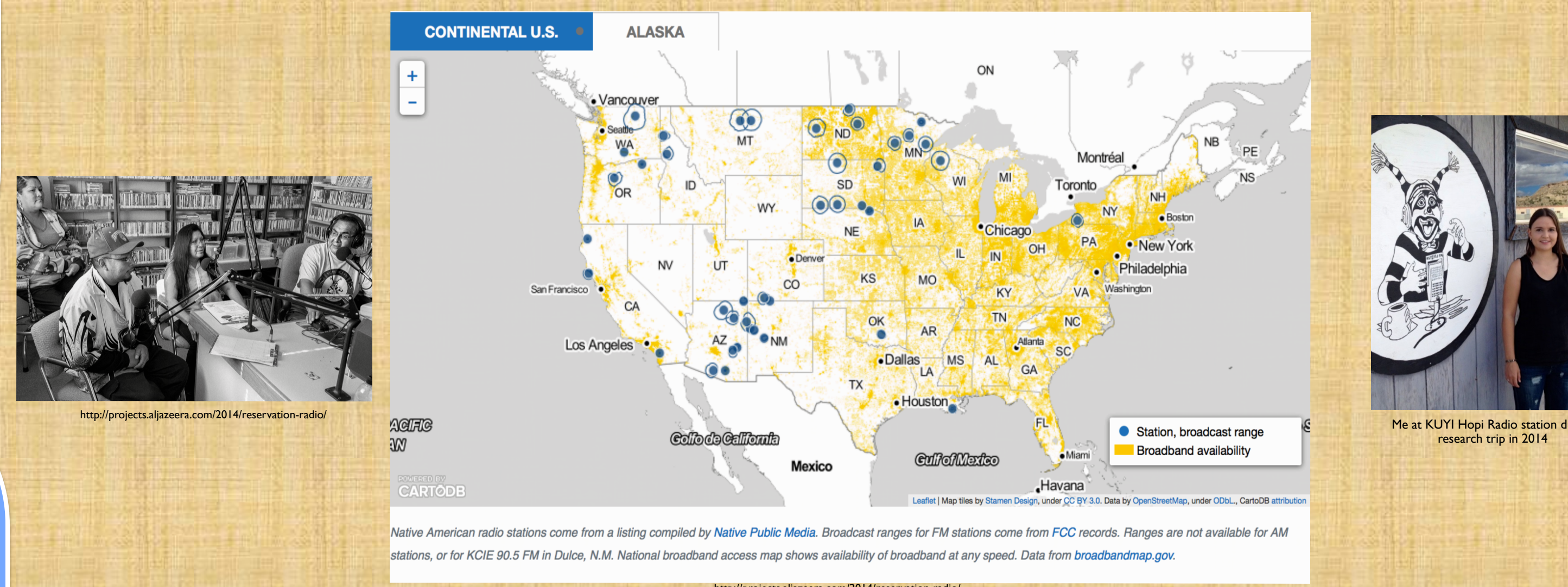
- **KUYI** (Keams Canyon, Arizona) — on-air since 2000, serving entire Hopi Reservation
- **KYUK** (Bethel, Alaska) — The first radio station entirely owned and operated by a U.S. Native Tribe (on-air since 1971); serving about 22,000 predominantly Yup'ik individuals in Southwestern Alaska

Research Questions

- Research Question 1:** How does tribal radio aim to improve the health of American Indians/Alaska Natives?
- Research Question 2:** What are the barriers and facilitators of tribal radio as a health information resource for reservation residents?
- Research Question 3:** What communicative strategies are used on tribal radio to inform about health?
- Research Question 4:** What does the audience learn about health from tribal radio?

Method

- **Individual Interviews** (Station managers, full-time staff members volunteers, radio show hosts involved with health-related programming)
- **Focus Groups** (8-10 participants per group who are tribal members over the age of 18 and regular listeners of their local tribal radio station)
- **Survey** (Sent to all 67 tribal radio stations in the U.S., either online or via postal service, asking about their mission statements, sources of funding, staff, reach, types of health-related programming, etc.)
- **Content Analysis** (Of any health-related content KUYI and KYUK are willing to share; content will be analyzed in terms of health issues addressed, structure (call-in show, interview, etc.) and communicative strategy (fear appeals, call to action, use of narratives, etc.)



Challenges & Lessons Learned

A challenge the project faces is the very limited prior work that exists on U.S. tribal radio in general, and the lack of scholarly work addressing tribal radio as a health information resource. This is also a unique opportunity for the project to make a contribution to the field of Media Studies, but also to Native American Studies and Public Health. The library staff, particularly Judy Smith, has been instrumental in identifying sources for both the academic and the applied aspects of the project. I will work with library staff to create the National Tribal Radio website. I also learned a great deal about community-based participatory research, as the project is conducted in close partnership with the radio stations and their tribal communities. The project will not only be approved by the UM IRB, but also by the respective tribal review boards in AZ and AK.

Acknowledgements & Sponsorship

I cannot express enough gratitude to my primary community partners Richard Alun Davis, Station Manager at KUYI Hopi Radio in Arizona, and Shane Iverson, Content and Operations Director at KYUK in Alaska, who not only do important and dedicated work within their local communities, but who are also committed to advancing scholarship and enhancing visibility of U.S. tribal radio. I further wish to extend my deepest thanks to Professor Angela A. Gonzales of Cornell University, long-term research mentor and co-Investigator on this project. I wish to thank the University of Michigan Library, and especially Judy Smith, for the outstanding support of my work. Finally, I am grateful for the support of the Arts of Citizenship program, with a special thanks to Dr. Matthew Countryman, Laura Schram, and Kush Patel. This project is sponsored by a 2015-2016 mini-grant awarded through the University Library's Student Engagement Program. As part of the mini-grant, I was paired with Judy Smith, Informationist at the Taubman Health Sciences Library. The project is further supported by the Arts of Citizenship Graduate Student Grants in Public Scholarship program.

Project Outcomes

- The project is part of my dissertation research
- Publication and conference presentations
- Interviews with station managers will inform questions for the focus groups that the radio stations feel would be most helpful for them to learn about from their audience. All data will be shared with the community partners.
- I will host health communication workshops at each radio station, sharing best practices grounded in Communication and Public Health theories and models
- Creation of a National Tribal Radio website (in collaboration with Native Public Media)
- Support of community partners' travel to professional conferences, such as the National Native Media Conference to network and present our findings